

# Density deficits

*[This is another in what we hope will be a large series of [expert blogs](#) on TOD highlighting work and research that experts are doing in the field. Today's post is by David Dixon FAIA, principal-in-charge, Planning and Urban Design at [Goody Clancy](#).]*

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## Destiny and density

Much has been written for this blog about the role of increased density in creating successful TODs. Memories of crowded pre-World War II tenements and the anonymous urban-renewal towers that replaced them, together with five decades of urban disinvestment, rendered the idea of increased density unpopular and unmarketable. Dramatic shifts in demographics and values, however, are rapidly reversing this situation.

ULI vice president Maureen McAvey says that “demographics are destiny,” and a rapid growth in younger and older homebuyers has transformed America from a mass housing market into what the ULI terms “a nation of niches.” While roughly three-quarters of households seeking housing included children in the 1970s, today the figure has dropped to less than one-quarter. Housing analyst Laurie Volk’s detailed research indicates that one- and two-person households now make up more than half America’s urban housing market, and these households increasingly seek townhouses, lofts, and other higher-density housing in short supply in most urban neighborhoods. She argues that demographics will support this trend for another 15 to 20 years. Economist Arthur Nelson [emphasizes](#) the growing potential demand for higher-density housing by projecting that America has roughly as much “large-lot suburban” housing and less than half as much “small-lot urban” housing as it will need in 2030.

Demand for higher-density housing and related amenities—shops, parks and, increasingly, jobs—within walking distance is transforming real estate markets. Chris Leinberger, a developer working with the Brookings Institution, [reports](#) that mixed-use, walkable developments now claim a premium of as much as 40% per square foot over single-use developments in the same community. Carol Coletta, who heads CEOs for Cities, reports that for every one point increase in “Walkability Score,” housing values in 24 metropolitan areas [increased](#) by up to \$6,000. During the current recession, suburban real estate values have suffered far more than urban counterparts.

Five blog entries that follow will make the case that the advantages of increased density—particularly enhanced walkability, concentrated disposable income, and fiscal rewards—make density not only relevant, but critical to making America’s cities more livable: building a sense of community in the midst of a more diverse society; restoring personal choices that have steadily diminished over the past five decades; fostering improved public health; achieving significant improvements in environmental sustainability; and creating a new generation of places that people love.

# Restoring personal choices

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When Goody Clancy's planners and urban designers ask people what they would like to add to their neighborhoods, three desires head the list: a vibrant Main Street that offers shops, services, and public places like restaurants in which to socialize; expanded housing options for those who are older, younger, have disabilities, or for other reasons don't prefer the "one-size-fits-all" housing that characterizes most neighborhoods; and alternatives to dependence on their cars.



An example of 52.9 units per acre in Boston

A [study](#) by Goody Clancy and Byrne McKinney Associates determined that between 1,000 and 2,000 housing units within a half-mile radius are required to support a block of Main Street retail (20,000-30,000SF). This number corresponds to neighborhoods with gross densities (not counting streets and parks) of 15 to 30 units per acre, a density that translates, for example, as a mix of narrow-lot detached single-family houses, row houses, and low-rise lofts. Reaching 4,000 or more housing units—a density of roughly 60 units per acre, characteristically found in admired neighborhoods like Boston's Back Bay—by adding mid- and high-rise housing, unlocks the opportunity to attract a neighborhood grocery store.

The same densities that support a local Main Street are well-suited to contemporary housing preferences. Housing analyst Laurie Volk reports that younger and older households interested in urban neighborhoods prefer higher-density, multifamily housing options to detached single-family houses by margins of three and four or more to one. She also reports that renters outnumber buyers in many urban markets. ULI notes that in contrast to prior decades, renters increasingly include higher-income households, and many urban markets lack sufficient, well-designed higher-density rental housing. Working with Goody Clancy to plan the new Uplands neighborhood in West Baltimore, Volk's [findings](#) indicated demand came from households that were young and old, black and white, gay and straight, with and without children, and that spanned a broad economic spectrum. The variety of housing types they sought was just as varied, but they all shared at least one preference—they wanted to live in this new urban neighborhood.

[Research](#) by transportation consultants Kittleson Associates indicates that the densities that support a Main Street represent a threshold level that supports walk-to BRT stations during peak hours, which removes the need for large, often very expensive, parking facilities. The higher

densities associated with the ability to support a supermarket can support BRT service throughout the day. The reward for reduced dependence on a car can be very real. Chris Leinberger reports that in contrast to households in auto-dependent suburbs, which spend roughly one-quarter of their disposable income on transportation, households in location-efficient neighborhoods served by transit spend only one-tenth of their disposable income on [transportation](#). Density, in effect, puts money in their pockets.

[\[Notes on sources\]](#)

## Building community in the midst of diversity

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Reese Fayde, former president of Living Cities (a consortium of major foundations that invest in urban neighborhoods), notes that “density makes diversity work.” Her rationale holds true across the full complement of qualities that constitute a diverse community—including income, race, age, or other differences—for three reasons:

Churches and schools once united homogenous communities. Today, neighborhoods depend on well-used parks programmed to attract people of different ages and backgrounds, revitalized Main Streets that promote informal interaction, libraries and other community spaces. Each of these new focal points of community depends on the increased walkability, disposable income, and/or fiscal benefits associated with density

Building the foundation for communities that bridge economic differences often requires greater densities. These densities, for example, allow the transformation of public housing developments into mixed-income neighborhoods with sufficient housing to welcome back long-term lower-income residents and draw new higher-income neighbors. High housing values in affluent neighborhoods mean that some of the value of market-rate housing can be used to subsidize affordable stock—a critical advantage in creating mixed-income developments during an era of scarce public resources.

The lively diverse blocks that Jane Jacobs memorialized thrived in part because they were sufficiently dense to host multiple small communities that intermingled and shared a neighborhood. In meetings with residents in HOPE VI redevelopments, I have been struck frequently by the comment: “I love my new apartment, but I miss having neighbors like me.” In effect whether rich or poor, young or old, black or white, these people welcome the economic diversity they had chosen to share, but make clear that a sense of community also requires a natural support network that grows from proximity to a critical mass of other single mothers, young professionals, retired folks, or others who share natural affinities.

# Fostering public health

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The connection between compact development and improved public health is well established. At the same time, rising housing values in walkable central cities are pushing lower-income households to car-dependent outer suburbs where housing is cheaper, as Chris Leinberger noted in the [March 2008 Atlantic Monthly](#). As a result, these Americans could face higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and other conditions kept in check by physical activity. As noted in a previous [blog post](#), increased density is central to providing the kinds of housing options that maintain income diversity in urban neighborhoods. Without a conscious effort to preserve and create significant affordable housing in core cities, unguided market forces will relocate America's poorest residents to its least healthy environments—auto-dependent outer suburbs.

There are also strong correlations among public health, disposable income, and density. Displacing lower-income households from transit-served urban neighborhoods to auto-dependent exurban settings also means that they will spend a far greater share of disposable income on transportation costs—Chris Leinberger has estimated roughly two and a half times as much. A recent [retail market study by Annapolis-based W-ZHA](#) of underserved Washington neighborhood demonstrated that new housing — higher-density mixed-income and market-rate development — had raised disposable income to levels that would support stores that sell fresh produce, health clinics, and other essential ingredients of enhanced public health.

For neighborhoods of any income, the real public health payoff comes from density sufficient to encourage walking. The densities that support Main Streets, active parks, and similar inviting destinations — for instance, a mix of narrow-lot single-family houses, row houses, and low-rise lofts — are the densities that invite walking. And having an attractive destination to walk to matters. The Centers for Disease Control renovated stairwells at its Atlanta headquarters but saw little change in use patterns. After coincidentally installing vending machines on stair landings, stair use shot up — the stairs became destinations that encouraged not just walking but climbing stairs.